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AUTHOR	Coats, Maggie
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ABSTRACT

In the United Kingdom, these two perspectives on lifelong learning sit uneasily together: emphasis on adults in employment and a focus on diversity and widening participation in adult education. A recent emphasis on accreditation with implications for funding has affected diversity and participation objectives because involving assessment, certification, or accreditation tends to discourage participation. The major question for adult educators is how accreditation can be used appropriately to recognize achievement while still promoting learning for the most disadvantaged and disenfranchised portion of the population. Higher and further education institutions, local authority adult education departments, voluntary organizations, and training programs for women were surveyed to determine how accreditation affects provision designed specifically for women. Findings indicated a need to reconsider threshold or entry provision for women in groups that have previously been under- or un-represented in adult education and training. A longitudinal case study of how required accreditation was implemented by a women's training scheme in a rural mining area found that some valued outcomes such as personal development and growth were difficult to quantify and assess. Despite being recognized as an example of good practice in developing the potential of women and providing quality training, the local authority decided the program was not cost effective and training opportunities for other disadvantaged groups had to be given priority, an outcome indicative of the tensions of implementing lifelong learning. (Contains 34 references.) (YLB)

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Maggie Coats

Lifelong Learning Policy and Practice: The Impact of Accreditation on Education and Training Provision for Adult Women in the UK

Introduction

In this paper I shall be looking at a contemporary issue at three different levels. First, at some aspects of lifelong learning policy and practice in the UK in the widest sense. Second, at the effects of this policy on a specific type of practice - education and training provision for certain groups of women. Third, I narrow the focus to look at just one case study - a particular training scheme for women - and explore how accreditation was introduced and the effects it had on their provision.

I will argue that the relevance of the issues explored in this paper is, however, much wider and reflects some general tensions in trying to encourage both the acceptance of lifelong learning as an idea and as a reality. I will explore the significance of initial schooling, issues of funding and of accreditation. I hope that much of my argument applies to other specific groups, as they intersect both vertically (like gender) and horizontally (like social class).

This paper tells a story that is both positive and encouraging, even though parts may seem negative and constrained. I hope you can apply it to developments in your own society and to other socially excluded groups with whom you work.

Lifelong Learning

Lifelong learning is a slogan that is meaningless unless it is translated into a policy and then into practice. In European terms at least, there is

an assumption that lifelong learning is a good thing, a desirable goal but one that has, as yet, to be reached. Depending on the definition, there are those who question whether the rhetoric can or will become a reality. (Hughes and Tight 1995)

All the evidence suggests that, in England and Wales at least, those who participate in adult education or training beyond compulsory schooling are those with the highest qualifications and the most successful previous learning experiences. In a study reported by Sargant et al (1997) 53% of adults in the lowest social classes had not participated in any learning since leaving school while 53% of those in the top social classes were currently participating in learning or had done so in the previous 3 years. If lifelong learning is to have any real impact upon a society it is the least well educated and trained who have to become involved, otherwise the divide between the most advantaged (economically, socially as well as educationally) and those who achieved the least is widened rather than reduced. This is the basis of the argument in Uden (1996).

In the UK at least there appears to be two perspectives that sit uneasily together. Prior to the European Year of Lifelong Learning and the publication of the paper from the EC (1996), the then Conservative Government issued its own vision of lifelong learning in a consultation document called »Lifetime Learning« (1995). The title reflects its emphasis, linked to the notion of »Lifetime Targets« for education and training that for adults focused (and still focus) on those in employment. Thus lifelong learning was positioned firmly in the case for economic competitiveness - a disappointment to those who looked for a wider vision.

Subsequently, the three major reports (Kennedy 1997, Fryer 1997 and Tomlinson 1996) that preceded the current Labour Governments »green« paper (*The Learning Age* 1998), made us hope for a different focus in definitions of lifelong learning.

The Kennedy (1997) and the Fryer (1997) reports discussed widening participation and notions of entitlement, citizenship and social inclusion. Tomlinson (1996), by definition, emphasised diversity.

In the Kennedy report we read: »Those who are disadvantaged educationally are also disadvantaged economically and socially; equity and viability dictate that all should have the opportunity to succeed. To continue with current policy at a time of rapid change will widen the

gulf between those who succeed in learning and those who do not, and puts at risk both social unity and economic prosperity.« (Kennedy 1997, p. 15)

»Knowledge and expertise already exists for reaching and supporting under-represented learners in further education. Luck, however, plays too great a role in whether the needs of prospective learners are met. Even within good institutions, good practice in widening participation is patchy. Good practice starts with the identification of those who do not take part. Once the learners have taken their first step, they must receive good quality information and guidance. They have to be well supported on their journey through a carefully designed learning programme and they may well need practical help to continue. The delivery of programmes must be of the highest standard. None of this can happen accidentally; it requires planning and management. Learners have to be able to recognise and record their learning gains and have them celebrated.« (Kennedy 1997, p. 77)

»Equity and inclusion should be at the centre of a policy for lifelong learning. This will mean adopting measures designed to widen opportunities, increase participation and overcome the barriers faced by those currently excluded from the benefits and pleasures of learning throughout life. Learning, and having access to it throughout life, should be thought of as a normal part of everyone's membership of our society. It should constitute a key element of modern citizenship. There should be no penalties attached to the particular modes, routes or methods of learning chosen by learners to achieve their goals. Those responsible for funding should give particular attention to this principle, adapting their funding regimes and methodologies to promote equality.« (Fryer 1997, p. 28)

But while echoes of these themes do appear in the subsequent Government consultation document *The Learning Age - a renaissance for a New Britain* (1998) once again the emphasis is firmly on economic as well as social factors.

»Learning is the key to prosperity - for each of us as individuals, as well as for the nation as a whole. Investment in human capital will be the foundation of success in the knowledge-based global economy of the twenty-first century. This is why the Government has put learning at the heart of its ambition.

To achieve stable and sustainable growth, we will need a well-educated, well-equipped and adaptable workforce. To cope with rapid change and the challenge of the information and communication age, we must ensure that people can return to learning throughout their lives. We cannot rely on a small elite, no matter how highly educated or highly paid. Instead, we need the creativity, enterprise and scholarship of all our people.« (*The Learning Age* 1988)

But the emphasis of this consultation paper was not only on economic imperatives: »As well as securing our economic future, learning has a wider contribution. It helps make ours a civilised society, develops the spiritual side of our lives and promotes active citizenship. Learning enables people to play a full part in their community. It strengthens the family, the neighbourhood, and consequently, the nation. It helps us fulfil our potential and opens doors to a love of music, art and literature. That is why we value learning for its own sake as well as for the equality of opportunity it brings.« (*The Learning Age* 1988)

For the purposes of this paper, however, there was another focus in the document that caused concern and that was the emphasis on accreditation and the implications of this for funding. Linking funding to accredited outcomes was not a new idea; it had been a key component of the very significant Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 which added further central control to the public funding of learning.

Funding Tied to Accreditation

The Further and Higher Education Act (FHE Act) of 1992 had linked public funding for education and training to certain prescribed types of provision and the effects had clearly not all been negative.

»Perhaps the biggest fillip to adult participation in vocational and academic education followed the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, when the Government agreed to fund an increase of 25% in the numbers taking programmes funded through the Further Education Funding Councils in England and Wales. The new opportunities have overwhelmingly benefited adults, who now comprise three in four of the FE student body. There has been a similar increase in adult numbers

in universities. In both sectors most of the adults are studying part-time, without access to mandatory financial support.« (Tuckett 1997, p. 8)

However, in the implementation of the Act the explicit link to accreditation had been a cause for concern to those involved in »threshold« (i.e. first step) provision. (Coats 1993) This is not only because non-accredited provision for »threshold« courses might disappear but also because the funding requirements may dictate what provision for what students are most beneficial to the providers. As Kennedy warns: »Since funding has been related to successful outcomes, namely qualifications attained by students, there has been a tendency for too many colleges to go in pursuit of students who are most likely to succeed. There has been a growth, but the students recruited have not come from a sufficiently wide cross-section of the community and there is concern that initiatives to include more working-class people, more disaffected young people, more women, more people from ethnic minority groups are being discontinued because they fall through the gaps in the system. Attracting and keeping those for whom learning is a daunting experience is hard work and financially unrewarding. The effort and resources required to support such students on courses receives insufficient recognition in the current funding system.« (Kennedy 1997, p. 3)

The process of obtaining funding is complex but some indication of the nature of this link are shown in what has become known as »Schedule 2 funding«. Schedule 2 of the Act lists the categories of provision that qualify for funding from the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) as follows:

a) courses leading to vocational qualifications recognised by the Secretary of State
b) courses leading to GCSE, A-level and AS-level qualifications
c) recognised courses providing access to higher education
d) courses preparing students for other courses which fall into categories a) to c)
e) courses for basic literacy in English
f) English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses
g) courses to teach basic principles in mathematics
h) in Wales, courses for proficiency or literacy in Welsh

j) courses designed to teach independent living and communication skills to those having learning difficulties

For those who realise that in implementing lifelong learning the biggest challenge is to encourage non-participants to take a »first step« into education and training some of the categories listed are inappropriate. For some groups (e.g. those needing ESOL or help with basic literacy and numeracy skills) there is funding, but for the large number of women and men whose initial experiences of education were unsuccessful there may be no way in. No matter how appropriate the »threshold« provision, any indication that some form of assessment, certification or accreditation is involved is likely to discourage participation even more. Although Section 2d (i.e. courses preparing students for other courses which fall into categories a) to c)) appeared to provide a possible entry route, that has subsequently been more firmly policed with tighter controls over the definition of »progression« and how that can be demonstrated. That provision is accredited is not enough; it must be listed as a course approved by the FEFC. This is despite the recommendations of the Kennedy Committee that:

»The Council should: include in the criteria for schedule 2(d) provision, any non schedule 2 provision which is specifically planned to act as a first step towards embarking on schedule 2 provision.« (Kennedy 1997, p. 26)

This seemed to be endorsed in *The Learning Age* although the funding categories were not questioned: »To realise our ambition, we must all develop and sustain a regard for learning at whatever age. For many people this will mean overcoming past experiences which have put them off learning. For others it will mean taking the opportunity, perhaps for the first time, to recognise their own talent, to discover new ways of learning and to see new opportunities opening up. What was previously available only to the few can, in the century ahead, be something which can be enjoyed and taken advantage of by the many.« (*The Learning Age*, p. 7)

An in-depth exploration of the types of accreditation that are approved, and arguments for or against it for particular groups of learners, are beyond the scope of this paper but to clarify my story in subsequent sections three points need to be made.

(i) In many current debates there appears to be confusion over the use of terms such as accreditation, recognition, assessment, and certification etc. In some cases, the course or module of learning is recognised, approved or accredited. Learners who complete it successfully may or may not be formally assessed, and may or may not be automatically certificated. In other cases accreditation implies that all learners individually should be assessed against the specified outcomes and criteria and thus individually certificated. A certificate can then be used to ensure recognition of learning, as a passport to further learning or for the satisfaction of the learner.

(ii) It is clear that the introduction of compulsory assessment and accreditation can have both positive and negative effects on learning. Introducing the requirement for accreditation to existing provision that has previously not carried any form of assessment will inevitably affect the design and delivery of the curriculum in some way. But many learners do value the recognition given to their achievement through accreditation. (Daines 1994; Davies and Wheeler 1995)

(iii) In the UK, since the 1980s, there has been an overwhelming move in many areas of education and most areas of training towards an outcomes-based assessment system, where achievement is matched to defined criteria. It is clear that there are both advantages and disadvantages in this approach but, again, the design and delivery of the curriculum is affected. This is particularly so where the outcomes and criteria for assessment are externally defined and imposed, as in National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), as opposed to a system where both are decided upon and defined by the provider, as in accreditation through one of the national Open College Networks (OCNs). (Ecclestone 1993)

I want now to look at how the concept of widening participation and social inclusion relate to particular groups in society and how the funding requirements of the FHE Act have affected provision for those groups. This will have direct effects on any attempt to develop lifelong learning within the UK and may exclude those groups who most need it. I take as an example work that has been done with particular groups of women but the implications have much wider relevance.

The Impact of Accreditation on Educational and Training Provision for Women

It is well known that in the UK many adult women do take up various kinds of education and training opportunities and that in certain types of provision they predominate. What is also evident is that some groups of women are totally excluded from any type of formal learning and that these are usually women who have no or few qualifications. By definition they are likely to be the most socially and economically disadvantaged.

Since the 1970s when the Sex Discrimination Act (SDA) made it legally possible to make provision for women-only a wide range of types of provision have developed. Not all of this provision has been for the most disadvantaged women but many learning opportunities have been designed specifically for groups within that category. In addition, many providers of education and training for women recognise the diversity of needs within and between different groups and have been aware that any provision must match the needs of the learners involved. Even so there are valid criticisms of women-only provision that warn that differences between participants and differences between providers may negate the claims that the cohesive support of the group is important. (Woolsey and McBain 1987; Brine 1994)

Over the years, what has been recognised as good practice in provision for women has evolved and continues to develop, both in the UK (Michaels 1973; Aird 1980; Coats 1994) and in Europe as a whole (European Bureau of Adult Education 1992). Many aspects of the curriculum have been informed by feminist pedagogy, whose approaches developed from the feminist movement, adapting and changing as issues of diversity became more apparent. My earlier attempt to describe the components of this provision included the following six areas:

Woman-centred education:

(I) Uses subjective experience and affective processes:

- respects the individuality of women
- starts from the experiences of women

- recognises the subjective response and values it
- acknowledges affective as well as cognitive processes
- says it's OK to explore yourself and your feelings
- gives space for each woman to explore her thoughts and feelings
- enhances confidence in skills/knowledge/abilities already possessed
- uses anecdotes and examples from women's lived experiences

(2) Locates gendered experience in a wider social context:
- recognises and values the distinctive attributes of women
- acknowledges the value of the domestic role
- analyses the mechanisms and manifestations of oppression
- de-constructs the gendered experience of initial schooling
- focuses the content on women's experiences
- uses examples/illustrations that are relevant to women
- shows that »the personal is the political«

(3) Recognises the importance of group support and collective action:
- supports women who are experiencing personal change
- encourages and values the contribution of each woman
- does not expose any woman against her will
- develops collectivity and support structures
- creates a »safe« environment which does not threaten
- sets any challenge only when there is support to help meet it
- allows women to discover that their problems are shared
- allows women to discover that their feelings are shared
- creates a shared learning environment in which students and tutors all contribute

(4) Uses methods and strategies that encourage participation:
- asks open rather than closed questions
- reduces the risk of damage from »wrong« answers
- encourages all women to actively participate
- makes it possible to say »I do not understand«
- provides experience in solving problems and finding solutions
- allows for experiential learning and reflectivity
- gives opportunities for creative expression
- focuses on perceived not received knowledge
- fosters co-operation not competition

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- relates all learning to experience
- helps women to identify and develop their own learning skills
- makes new ways of learning exciting and enjoyable

(5) Continuously reviews, evaluates and develops:
- provides a student controlled or negotiated curriculum
- encourages continuous and honest feedback
- leads to the empowerment of individual women and the group
- devises strategies for continued learning
- allows for progression by providing information and guidance
- prepares women for moving on by developing transitional skills

(6) Removes barriers and improves practicalities:
- makes sure that timing, cost and place are appropriate
- maximises accessibility
- provides facilities or resources for the care of dependants
- reaches out to women wherever they are
- recognises the need for women tutors
- recognises the needs of women tutors
- rewards women tutors for their skills and commitment. (Coats1989)

In 1995 a small working group of the Women's Education Policy Committee of the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), realising that the implementation of the FHE Act and the requirement for accreditation might have implications for provision for women, particularly for those in the most vulnerable groups, carried out a survey, jointly with the Open University, of existing courses for women. This tried to identify how the type of provision had changed, and how the curriculum was affected, by the requirement for accreditation. We were concerned that funding requirements and the imposing of accreditation, would challenge some aspects of feminist pedagogy and threaten what was known and proved to be good practice. The focus was on women-only provision that was attempting to remove barriers to learning; to create a supportive learning environment and to enable informed and appropriate progression - all essential components of threshold provision that might encourage women to take their fist step towards lifelong learning. (McGivney 1992)

In a submission to the Kennedy Committee we defined the kind of women for whom we had most concern as follows:

»Whilst we endorse the FEFC funding categories as outlined in Schedule 2, we feel most strongly that there is a potential group of learners who are rendered invisible by the categories as currently defined. Our concern is primarily for women learners but we acknowledge that many men may also fall into this category.

We are concerned about those who are non-traditional learners and who do not currently enrol for any learning programme. These are women who have not even entered 'threshold' provision because they do not realise that any learning opportunities are appropriate for them. These are the 'non-traditional' participants in adult learning.

We have attempted to define the characteristics of this group but we realise that tight categorisation may not be possible. In our experience these are women who:

- have little or no post school learning experiences
- left school before or at the earliest possible opportunity
- have very few or no formal educational qualifications
- are entirely dependent on state benefit or have very low incomes
- may be in low paid and part time jobs
- have previously shown no explicit interest in education
- have considerable potential but very low motivation as learners
- may be facing severe social deprivation or discrimination
- may be facing problematic personal circumstances
- may have personal characteristics that make learning difficult for them

Women in groups that are currently disadvantaged in our society or who face discrimination such as black and ethnic minority women and older women. In addition such potential learners may live in inner city areas, peripheral estates or isolated rural areas.«

Summary of findings from the OU/NIACE Study

The group sent questionnaires to a number of higher and further education institutions, to local authority adult education departments, voluntary organisations and a range of training schemes for women.

We were particularly interested in provision specifically »for women« but describing this is difficult. The legal position is unchanged - the SDA covers training for non-traditional work and provision for women wanting to return to work after period of domestic responsibility. But there are several problems in defining provision for women-only:

i. restrictions placed by funders who may insist that courses are open to all;
ii. provision designed for women, but not exclusive to women, because it does not fit the SDA definition;
iii. provision for all adults, but which is taken up solely/mainly by women;
iv. total misunderstanding and confusion over the use of positive action, i.e. an insistence that what women have men must have too.

The findings are based on 100 responses from providers in all the categories above. Including:

Colleges of Further Education:	50 (35 women-only)
Adult Education services:	28 (11 women-only)
Universities:	7 (5 women-only)
WEA branches:	5 (5 women-only)
Schemes/centres for women:	10 (9 women-only)

So of these at least 65 explicitly stated provision for women-only.

Current provision for women

My analysis here mainly focuses on provision designed specifically for women whether designated women-only or not. Despite the difficulties of classifying provision from the titles provided, three categories were used. (For further definitions see Coats 1996.)

- provision that prepared women to *return to learn* (i.e. that led to educational as opposed to vocational courses)
- provision that prepared women to *return to work* (i.e. that led to further training or employment)
- provision that provided women with the opportunity *to reassess and re-orientate* before making further decisions.

The most common provision was in the »return to work« category (77 courses) compared to other re-entry provision. There were 65 »return to reassess« and 24 »return to learn« responses, although there may

have been a possible overlap between the categories. For example, some re-entry courses such as »Fresh Start« or »New Opportunities for Women« have explicit progression routes. Some are to academic provision (return to learn); others to vocational courses (return to work), so it is difficult to classify them from the title.
Other categories of provision included provision for Black and Asian women (25); first aid and health care (26); basic skills (literacy/numeracy) (10); parenting courses (5) and courses for volunteers (7).

Accreditation

Most of the women-only courses used OCN accreditation. Only explicitly vocational courses offered qualifications such as NVQs that are externally designed. One respondent wrote: »The effect of accreditation on provision is only undesirable if output related funding forces it to drive an inflexible fast journey with no pauses, no recognition of individuals' needs, starting points or pace of progress - or if inappropriate accreditation is imposed on programmes for learners.«

Changes in provision

Only 49 providers had been making provision for women for more than 5 years and most of those offered only one course. There were some notable exceptions - there is a long history for many types of provision (e.g. NOW-type courses) and some training schemes for women have been in existence for over 10 years. However, changes in staffing meant that response to questions about discontinued courses and to changes in content was low.

Discontinued courses

30 providers gave some information, mainly about the curtailing of provision such as one-day events; discussion groups; and non-accredited courses. The reasons given were change in funding; less need perceived; priorities changed; SDA act challenged.

Changes in content

47 providers mostly retained their provision but had made changes in its length and in content to fit funding and accreditation requirements. The withdrawal of funding meant the end of some local authority adult education provision, some of which had passed to local colleges.

Summary of main points from the findings

Provision:
- There is a tension between the need for accreditation and widening access
- Concern that some groups of women who are not crossing the »threshold« because of the nature of some provision
- Identified need for pre-provision - informal, local, non-threatening, non-accredited
- Need for greater clarity about use of women-only provision
- Need to challenge the myths and misunderstandings
- Need to challenge the hierarchy of needs - women give way to young unemployed etc.

Process:
- Need to regain the balance between product (i.e. the outcomes of the provision) and the process (of learning)
- Must focus on the learning experience not what you get at the end of it
- Develop minimum criteria for assessment
- Some important outcomes should not be assessed - but included in overall accreditation
- Need to regain the balance between the learning provision and its development - and the administration of accreditation
- Regain the balance between the experience of learning and the process of assessment and certification

Progression:
- Women's need for learning - education and training - is not dependent on re-entry to the workforce

- At point of re-entry - they have an immediate need which may - or may not - be work; they are not likely to have a short-term, or even long-term, plan
- Evidence shows that a learning experience can lead anywhere. Multi-exit possibilities
- Progression routes for women are impossible to predict
- They are not linear; not upwards and onwards. May need to be deferred
- Accumulating credit - for what? Developing skills - for what?
- Must keep the options open

These findings indicate that there is a need to reconsider threshold provision - that first step for women in groups that have previously been not just under-represented but almost un-represented in adult education and training. Any discussion of encouraging lifelong learning whether for economic or social reasons must recognise this.

Extensive research by Veronica McGivney has shown:

»As the funding available for the education and training of adults has become increasingly achievement-led, provision has become skewed towards those forms which lead to 'hard' outcomes such as qualifications, educational progression, jobs or placements. This has inevitably led to a growth of instrumental programmes for women and some long-established courses have been re-formulated to fit the funding criteria. Although there are still some Return to Learn and New Opportunities courses, the number of general reorientation programmes has dwindled in recent years while vocational, Return to Work and Access courses have burgeoned.

A high proportion of courses specifically for women are now geared to, or incorporate aspects of, training for employment. This is not an unwelcome development. Many women understandably want to return and to gain a more secure foothold in the labour market and it has been found that they are significantly more likely than men to pay for their own work-related education and training.« (McGivney in Benn et al 1998, p. 10)

Whilst accreditation can be a deterrent to some individuals, there is evidence that it can also lead to an enhancement of confidence and a route to progression. The issue is not just whether it is always necessary, but also about what type of accreditation is used and how it is implemented.

»The major question for adult educators is how we can use accreditation to enhance recognition of achievement whilst keeping the debate about access to a range of learning, and about the purposes of learning and accreditation alive.

We need to know when accreditation is appropriate and beneficial, when it constrains achievement or access and when learning outcomes and assessment to support learning is enough without offering a formal certificate.« (Ecclestone 1993, p. 180)

»There is a place for accredited Local Authority Education, but as our interviews have indicated, much depends on the interpretation of accreditation. We need to be imaginative in our approach to assessment. For example, collective working methods with joint student essays and presentations, collective marking and personal logs of learning all challenge the mainstream assumptions that only individually graded written work ensures standards of achievement. Furthermore, such approaches could overcome some of the fears students expressed in the questionnaires about accreditation fostering a more competitive atmosphere. The issue of assessment would also be made an integral part of the course content as students would be confronted explicitly with epistemological issues as they would be required to assess not only the work of others but their own work too.« (Stewart and Thomson 1995, p. 154)

There is now growing evidence from various examples of good practice in providing education and training opportunities for women (Coats 1996) that we do know how best to introduce and implement accreditation when it is considered necessary and beneficial to the learners.

The final section of this paper looks at a longitudinal study of one type of provision for women that was forced to introduce accreditation and what impact this had on the curriculum and on the learners. It also highlights one of the main tensions in the lifelong learning policy facing the UK today. Given that lifelong learning is to be encouraged and that there is not sufficient public funding for all categories of learner, how do you prioritise those in greatest need? And how do you apply quality assurance indicators and quantitative criteria to provi-

sion where the real outcomes cannot be measured immediately if at all?

Case Study of a Women's Training Scheme

This scheme is located in the English Midlands in what was a rural mining area. As the mines closed in the 1980s unemployment rose and the area became recognised as one with extreme economic and social need. Women in the small towns and villages have always been isolated and have traditionally had few opportunities for training or employment. Public transport is poor.
This is the kind of provision that directly addressed the barriers outlined in McGivney (1993):

... difficulties identified (by a group of women) in gaining access to education, training and employment:

Personal and domestic constraints
lack of qualifications and experience
negative school experience
lack of childcare
lack of support from male partners and families
pressure or discouragement from others
lack of money for education/training

Dispositional or psychological constraints
lack of confidence, drive or motivation
fear (of not being clever enough)
lack of clearly identified direction
the »guilt factor« (vis-à-vis domestic/family responsibilities)

Structural constraints
lack of jobs
lack of training schemes
lack of information on opportunities available
lack of guidance (McGivney 1993, p. 10)

The women's training scheme, one of two in the county, opened in 1985 part funded from the European Social Fund and part from the local authority. Despite some initial difficulties and management problems the scheme became recognised as an example of good practice in its provision for women. Ten years later in a publication celebrating the success of both schemes Glenys Kinnock wrote:
»Since opening the (name) scheme in 1985, I have kept in touch with both centres and have watched them grow from strength to strength. (The scheme) has made a significant contribution to developing the potential of women in (the county), whilst demonstrating a model of good practice in providing quality training which meets women's needs. I am proud of my association with (the scheme). Congratulations to all staff and trainees, past and present, with best wishes for the next ten years!« (Glennys Kinnock, MEP)
The scheme (not identified in this paper because of current sensitivities about its survival) provided training for women-only in what are usually called »non-traditional« skill areas (i.e. those that were traditionally male dominated) such as plumbing, painting and decorating, carpentry and joinery, motor mechanics and electronics. More recently computing was added to the options available. Training in the skill areas was supported by sessions in maths and English, technical drawing, women's studies and personal development. All trainees had work placements and advice and support in choosing »Future Options«.
From the outset this scheme designed its provision for those women who were among the most disadvantaged in the area. Priority was given to women with no educational qualifications, on state benefit or low income. Many had personal and social problems. With childcare and travel provided, such women could not have found any other opportunities for training. Outreach workers helped women to understand what the scheme had to offer and supported them throughout their course.
The running of the scheme was clearly based in feminist practice though not overtly so. All the characteristics of good practice outlined above were evident. Progression routes for the women trainees varied. Although some did move on to further training or employment in their chosen skill area, others followed different routes to further and higher education; to other types of employment or voluntary work. It is im-

portant to understand that progression for women is not always »upward«; it may need to be sideways or deferred due to personal circumstances. As Uden (1996) argues, this is often the case for threshold provision.

»Participation in education and training is not only about people following conventional courses in conventional settings and wide participation will require that 'new' students find their ways to learning through routes and organisations which seem appropriate to them. Sometimes these routes will lead them back to conventional settings, sometimes they will wish to remain where they are and sometimes they will even wish to change the mainstream but some of the changes which will be needed to bring about a truly learning society will be found among the untidy, creative, risk-taking voluntary organisations.« (Uden 1996, p. 53)

The use of European Funding for projects like this have be criticised (Brine 1992 and 1993; Rees 1995) but non-traditional training for women is not only about turning out more workers in those occupations. In this scheme it was essentially about providing the first step - threshold provision - for women who were otherwise very unlikely to be involved in any education, training or employment at all. It was about development and growth, enhancing confidence, building self-esteem and transforming lives. Providing that kind of opportunity through training in practical skills is often more attractive to women whose previous educational experiences were disastrous and damaging. Many similar schemes have demonstrated how successful this kind of provision can be. (Ardron 1996)

The scheme went through a process of change when the requirement for accreditation was imposed on them by their funders. Initially this was resisted, with most staff fearing that the very existence of some form of assessment and accreditation would deter the very women for whom the training was designed. Gipps and Murphy show clearly how closely success in assessment is linked to confidence: »A factor which contributes to performance is confidence - this is intimately related to both past achievement and motivation. Lack of confidence has frequently been cited as a reason for inhibiting the success of girls and women. This is not, however, necessarily related to low ability, since even when girls achieve as well or better than boys, they tend to underestimate themselves compared with boys.« (Gipps and Murphy 1994, p. 273)

After much discussion, the scheme opted for OCN accreditation for the whole programme rather than using NVQs for the skill areas. Despite their reservations and the added workload of implementing this, it was successfully introduced in 1994 with any potentially damaging effect on the delivery of the curriculum being mediated by the commitment and skills of the staff.

As their external moderator since the introduction of this accreditation I have been involved in many of the discussions about the curriculum and the new developments that have been made. The main issue, never satisfactorily resolved, has always been the expectation by the Open College concerned that accreditation should recognise different levels of performance by individual women; most of the staff have resisted this. Introducing more than one level of attainment means that some women are »more successful« than others. The objection is that this provision is a first step for the most disadvantaged women in the area and any replication of the »failure« they experienced at school might not only deter them from joining the scheme but affect the supportive and collaborative nature of the learning group.

Notes from an accreditation meeting for staff in 1993:

»There is a worry that different levels would undermine the spirit of co-operation and non-competitiveness that is built at (the scheme). A lot of time is spent convincing women that what is important is her own achievement and not how much faster/better or worse she is than the woman next to her. By giving different women different levels it could undermine these efforts and it was felt that it would be less likely that the more able women will spend time working with the less able if they felt that they will be held back.

It could undermine the confidence that women gain while on the scheme. While obviously women are aware that they may not be as quick or able as others in their group, it is not so easy to cope with when they get a certificate that makes it official. It seems to contradict what they have been told about it not mattering and could well knock back their confidence again. Particularly those women that come with negative experiences from school and who have labelled themselves as failures. The different levels are different grades and they could see themselves as not achieving again.«

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If there is concern about differential attainment in the skill areas this is even more evident for the support subjects. Many women make enormous improvement in their maths and English while participating in the scheme. Some of this can be assessed on an outcomes basis but the enhanced confidence that accompanies that achievement is not only about accreditation. Other women travel great distances in improving their maths and English but may not reach the same outcome as others. Even more debatable is the original inclusion in the accreditation of »subjects« like personal development, women's studies and future options. How do you assess increased awareness, growth and development? After much discussion and several attempts the accreditation of most of these subjects was dropped.

This raises the issue of selective accreditation. There has been a drive to identify all the outcomes of a learning programme and then devise the assessment of all these outcomes for accreditation. But providers may not wish to accredit some »learning outcomes«, even though they are important. It may be that the accreditation only shows what funders want but not necessarily what providers value - which may well be outcomes that funders might not want. (Davies 1996) For example, last December women trainees at the scheme demonstrated very clearly that they had begun to understand issues of exclusion and oppression along both class and gender dimensions; many had impressively increased their confidence and their ability to communicate effectively. When the local authority announced the closure of the scheme some of the trainees, on current and former courses, occupied the building.

The end of the story is that the local authority had decided that the scheme was not cost effective, and that training opportunities for other disadvantaged groups had to be given priority. As always the needs of others take precedence over the needs of women; which is not to say that the needs of other groups are not important. (McGivney 1998) From the local authority's final report, and from my correspondence with local politicians and local officials, it became clear that the decision-makers had no idea how to evaluate this type of provision or to recognise the effects it had on the lives of hundreds of women in that community. Back to the tensions of implementing lifelong learning.

Conclusions

If lifelong learning is assumed to be a good thing the real questions are *why* is it a goal to pursue; *how* will it be implemented and, most important, *who* will take priority in initiatives to take forward the cause? We know who does and who does not participate in learning and we know well how to provide for those who have not previously participated. For the rhetoric to become reality, hard decisions have to be taken which involve the use of public funding and the identification of priorities. Funding policies, like those in the UK, effectively determine what kinds of provision will be available, and accreditation of that provision becomes mandatory since that appears to be the only way - ineffective and inappropriate as it may be - to guarantee that the real aims of the policy are met. However, this paper has argued that an over-emphasis on credentialism may discourage widening participation and increased opportunities for lifelong learning.

If, as the evidence suggests, those who are least likely to engage in lifelong learning are those who received least from their initial learning experiences, then those groups have to be targeted and prioritised. But if an earlier experience of educational failure is one of the main barriers to participation, then provision that is assessed and accredited may not be attractive to those learners, at least in the initial stages.

If then, creative and committed providers conform to expected outcomes and yet still manage to provide the kind of learning experience that can enable the participants to progress - maybe to become lifelong learners - there still remains the dilemma that with insufficient resources there will be a perceived hierarchy of »need« and allocation made on crude and inappropriate criteria. Rather than widening participation it can result in narrowing the options and demanding conformity. Years of experience have shown us how to engage disadvantaged women in a learning experience that can transform their lives. In one area of the English Midlands that opportunity, and that potential entry to »lifelong learning«, no longer exists.

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